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ABSTRACT

This guide is designed to help principals and/or other school leaders answer parent questions such as Why does my child need to learn this? What's new and better from the old system? What do the scores on the state test really mean? Will my child still be able to get into a good college? and What practical steps can I take at home to help my child in school? The guide offers communications advice, coupled with practical steps that principals and states have used successfully all across the country. It states that the communications challenge goes beyond getting good public relations for school and that the work is about building a shared understanding of academic success among students, parents, teachers, staff, and the community. The guide offers specific suggestions on how to be proactive with a school's community of parents, how to stay focused on substance, how to explain higher expectations, how to connect to what parents value, how to develop straightforward messages, how to use the most effective messenger, and how to demonstrate success. The text closes with advice on how to start a successful communications program and where to turn for more information. (RJM)

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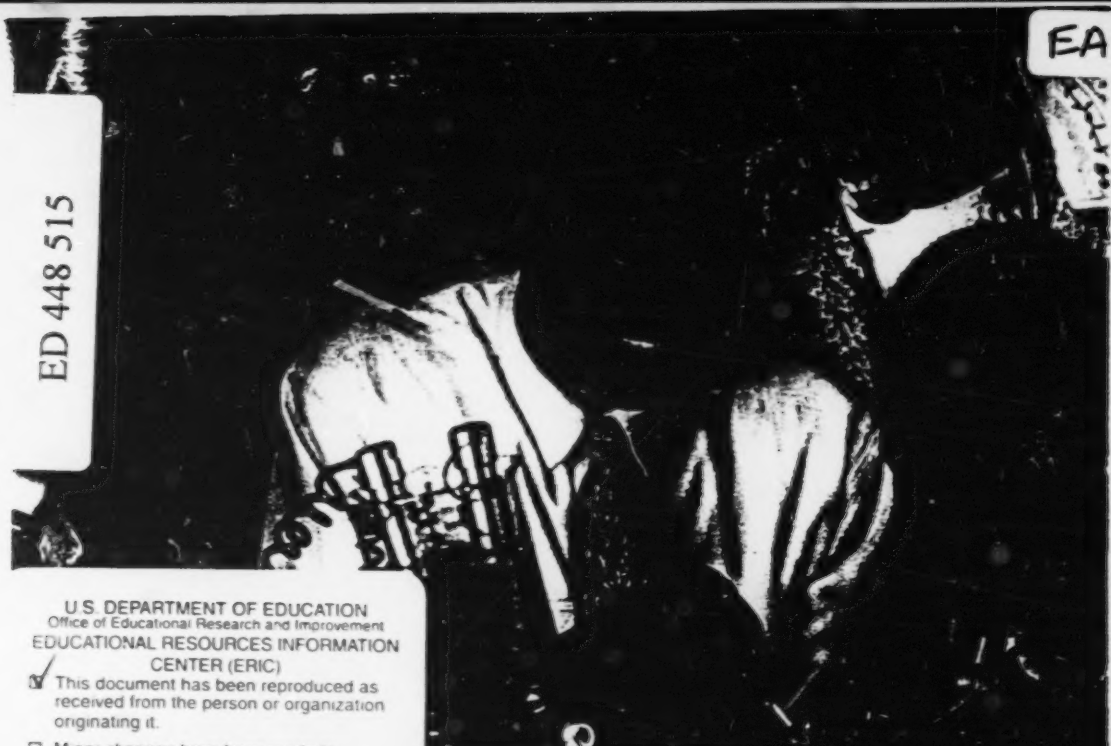

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Building Local Support for Higher Standards and Better Schools

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How Good Communications Can Help Students Achieve — and Your School Succeed

The national movement to raise academic standards now touches virtually every American community. Forty-nine states have adopted more rigorous standards in English, math and the other core subjects. Most are introducing more challenging tests to measure whether students have mastered the standards. Many are implementing accountability systems that offer a mix of incentives and sanctions (ranging from giving cash awards to high-performing schools to taking over low-performing schools) to help students reach the standards.

The good news is that, as a result of these reforms, a growing number of states and school districts are seeing significant improvements in student achievement. States such as Colorado, Connecticut, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina and Texas, along with local districts such as Brazosport, Texas, and District 2 in New York City, often are cited for their strong gains. The challenge is to learn from successes like these — and use them to spur progress elsewhere.

A key part of the challenge is to help parents, students, teachers, taxpayers and others understand why these changes are needed — and what they look like in the classroom. Unfortunately, while state and school district policymakers have been active in developing new policies and regulations, they have been much less proactive in helping local school leaders communicate about the standards to the people who most need to know: students, parents, teachers, and business and other community leaders. That job has been left largely to local school principals. For many of these school leaders, communicating about new standards and tests is another assignment added to an already

overcrowded day. Understandably, school leaders like you need assistance.

Key Questions, Practical Advice

This guide is designed to help principals and/or other school leaders answer parent questions such as: Why does my child need to learn this? What's new and better from the old system? What do the scores on the state test really mean? Will my child still be able to get into a good college? What practical steps can I take at home to help my child in school?

The guide offers communications advice, coupled with practical steps that principals and states have used successfully in communities all across the country.

Obviously, good communications alone will not help more students achieve at higher levels. The academic standards themselves need to be strong, the new tests need to be linked to the standards, schools need to be teaching the curriculum that the standards require and the tests measure, and teachers and schools need the professional development and resources to help all children — even those left behind in the past — reach the standards.

Using This Guide

However — and this is the key point — even when all of this is done, local school leaders still will be left with one huge assignment: to help explain these changes to parents, students and their communities. That's where this guide comes in.

The communications challenge goes beyond getting good PR for your school or sending positive messages. The work is really about building a shared understanding among students, parents, teachers, staff and the community about what academic success looks like, why it's important and how adults in your community are working together to help students get there.

You need everyone on the same page — good communications can help.

This guide offers communications advice, coupled with practical steps that principals and states have used successfully in communities all across the country.

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[1]

Being Proactive With Your Parent Community

Everyone in the school community, from teachers to custodians, has a responsibility to help students reach the standards. But people can't help if they themselves aren't clear about what students are expected to know and be able to do (the standards) and how students are being measured (the tests). Subsequent sections of this guide describe more fully why internal communications are so important and how principals can engage their staffs on these issues. The first step, however, is for principals themselves to recognize the need for good communications (internal and external) and budget time and resources accordingly.

Don't wait until the state's test scores are released before communicating with parents. If you're in a state (such as Kentucky, Maryland or Washington) or a school district that has a comprehensive strategy for communicating about standards and tests, follow their lead. Take advantage of the materials they have prepared and the events they have scheduled.

Thinking strategically ...

In **Corpus Christi, Texas,** school leaders convened several groups of parents to gauge their current understanding of the district's new standards and ascertain how parents want to receive information. One result: Schools decided to cancel plans for a districtwide newsletter and reallocated the funds to train principals and teachers in communicating more effectively with parents.

As part of its comprehensive plan to involve more parents in helping students meet standards, **Philadelphia, Pa.,** schools started the 1999–2000 year by mailing a calendar and brochure to every home. The calendar offered month-by-month learning activities, mainly involving reading, for parents to do with their children. The brochures (a different one was sent for each grade) provided parents with specific examples of what their children should be learning this year.

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Even without state or district support, however, local school principals have multiple opportunities for communicating with parents about standards and tests. At a minimum, take advantage of existing events. For example, make sure that at least part of your Back-to-School Night is devoted to helping parents better understand the new standards and how their children will be measured against the standards. Many schools are setting aside time for parents to take abbreviated versions of the new state tests; that way, they can see for themselves how challenging some of these new assessments are.

Make sure that parent-teacher conferences are focused much more explicitly on areas where a student's performance falls short of a standard — and on what the teacher and parent can do to help the student improve. When you send home quarterly report cards, include sample standards, test questions and student work that meets the standards. States like Kentucky and Texas publish all the previous year's questions. Some schools even include sample test questions and other standards-related material on the backs of school lunch menus that go home in backpack mail.

[2]

Stay Focused on Substance

Principals from schools whose students have shown the largest gains on standards-based tests often report that their strategy is to keep everyone focused on The Main Thing: improved student achievement. As Houston School Superintendent Rod Paige says, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." In Washington state, for instance, principals at 30 schools that have had at least 50 percent annual gains on the new state test are focusing all programs, staff development, funding and even volunteer activities on the single goal of improving student achievement.

Focused communications play a key role in keeping everyone on task. For example, in schools where meeting standards is the top priority, a visitor should find evidence of standards everywhere — large posters in classrooms offer a constant reference point for what students should be learning; student work is displayed in the halls, on classroom walls and on the school's Web site; and students themselves (even first graders) can describe clearly what they need to know and be able to do in order to reach each learning standard.

The starting place, of course, is to get the substance of the new standards, assessments and accountability system right. The chief responsibility for this work typically resides outside a principal's control — with state or school district leaders.

But principals and teachers often have more power than they think in shaping new state and district policies. Especially in states and districts that have struggled to implement standards-based reforms, state education departments and central offices increasingly recognize the importance of getting up-front participation and buy-in from the people closest to students — classroom teachers and school principals. More state and district leaders are seeing that it's not realistic to expect local school leaders to work toward meeting new standards and tests that they didn't have a role in developing or that they don't know about. If the standards and tests themselves are developed in a vacuum and are not aligned, no amount of communications will help.

Focusing on standards ...

In **Minneapolis, Minn.**, the district provided every classroom with posters featuring fun, colorful icons that illustrate the standards — part of a larger effort to create a classroom environment where standards are central.

In schools from **Batesville, Ark.**, to **New York City** and other districts using materials developed by **New Standards**, all instruction and assessment are centered on student work. Students, teachers and parents critique every assignment, asking questions like: Does this meet the standard? If not, where does it fall short, and specifically what must the student do to improve it? Can we point the student to examples of exemplary work?

Walk into any **El Paso, Texas**, classroom, and you are likely to be greeted by a student showing you a piece of his or her work and reporting whether it has met the standards or not. Even first graders have internalized standards well enough to have these kinds of conversations with each other, their teachers and visitors.

The communications challenge isn't about creating "better spin." It's about working together — with lots of input from the front-line educators — to create a quality product (a system of standards, assessment and accountability) and then using the tools of communications to help keep people focused on successful implementation.

[3]

Explain *Why* Your School is Expecting More

As the principal, you need to be able to explain why your school is using higher standards and new tests that measure whether students are meeting the standards. Change is difficult, so you need to give parents good reasons to abandon their old ways of thinking about education — to help them see that what was good enough when they were in school is not good enough today. Communities have found the following three arguments to be effective:

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Preparing students for the changing world — Our students must graduate prepared to compete — even in their home towns — with job applicants from across the nation and around the world. But many American students aren't achieving at their full potential. In reading, only 29 percent of the nation's fourth graders, 31 percent of eighth graders and 39 percent of 12th graders are Proficient or above, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The percentages are lower in math and science.

Moreover, the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) showed that American fourth-grade students performed well against their foreign counterparts, but middle school students were slightly below average, and high school students ranked toward the bottom of the list. Even America's best high school students fared poorly on the test, an argument that can be used with suburban parents who think their local schools don't need to improve.

Accountability — Higher standards and better student performance provide proof to the community that their tax dollars are being spent wisely. And they demonstrate to companies, colleges and universities that high school graduates have the knowledge and skills to be successful in college or the workplace.

Principals can do a lot to spread these messages. For example, regularly invite businesspeople to explain to your students and their parents how jobs that didn't used to require much academic mastery now

The voice of business and higher education ...

In **Maryland**, a cadre of "thirtysomething" business leaders are barnstorming every high school in the state, helping students better understand how what they're learning in class will help them succeed in the "real world."

In **Rochester, N.Y.**, the business community has guaranteed a certain number of jobs every year to high school graduates who perform at a certain level of proficiency.

In **Oregon**, the higher education community is sending a strong signal to students that their efforts in high school actually count. Starting in 2002, state-sponsored colleges and universities will admit students based on demonstrations of specific knowledge and skills; that is, students who meet the challenging standards will be rewarded with college admission.

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require good communications skills, an ability to work in teams, and knowledge of subjects such as algebra and statistics — the kinds of knowledge called for by the new standards. Whether a child grows up to be a surgeon, computer technician, teacher or airplane mechanic, he or she will be expected to apply high levels of skills and knowledge on the job.

Testimonials from college admissions officers are more persuasive with many parents, especially suburban parents who expect their children to attend first-rank colleges and universities; invite admissions officers to address parent-teacher organization meetings, college fairs or other parent gatherings. Often, the most persuasive advocates for higher standards are recent graduates, who can speak firsthand about how their school experience did (or did not) prepare them for higher education or challenging, well-paying jobs.

Equity — We need to prepare every graduate to be a productive citizen. For moral, social and economic reasons, no student should be left behind. Having high expectations for *all* students represents a commitment to educate everyone, specifically including low-income and minority children, who too often have done less well in school.

[4]

Connect to What Parents Value

Principals need to show parents, students, teachers and others how they will benefit personally from higher standards. They need to be able to answer "Why change?" and "What's in it for me?" questions. That means you first need to be clear about what people in your school community most value.

This is where listening comes in — through focus groups, surveys or both. For instance, in Cleveland, Ohio, a recent survey of what parents, community members and teachers expected of their schools was used to shape the new learning standards. In Cleveland, as in many other communities, parents said they were most interested in having their children master the basic subjects of reading, writing, math, American history and computer skills; subjects such as music, art and physical education tend to rank much lower.

Other communities, such as Corpus Christi, Texas, and San Jose, Calif., have used focus groups to better understand how parents want to learn about the school's standards and tests; in many cases, parents prefer face-to-face meetings over long newsletters or other printed material — and over reading about standards and tests in the local newspaper.

The communications lesson is: Ask parents what they value. And then deliver. Fortunately, local principals do not have to start from

Taking the parents' pulse ...

Public Agenda, a nonprofit organization based in New York City, has an excellent Web site (www.publicagenda.org) that includes a wealth of data and analyses about parents' attitudes toward education — with a special focus on their attitudes about standards, testing, curriculum and accountability. The annual **Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup** poll also features helpful insights about public attitudes toward all aspects of K–12 education (visit www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kpol9909.htm).

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scratch. National research by groups such as A-Plus Communications and Public Agenda contain useful findings. For instance, parents tend to say that basic skills in reading, writing, math, science and computers are top priorities for receiving a diploma; they're nonnegotiable. Parents' second-tier priorities tend to include subjects such as history, advanced math (including algebra) and advanced science (such as physics).

Importance of Various Subject Areas

QUESTION: "Now here are some things the local public schools in your community could concentrate on teaching. Please tell me whether you think each is absolutely essential, important but not essential, or not too important for your local schools to be teaching."

Percentage Saying "Absolutely Essential"	General Public	Parents	Teachers	Leaders
Basic reading, writing and math skills	92%	91%	98%	99%
Computer skills and media technology	80%	78%	88%	75%
American history and American geography	63%	61%	83%	61%
Biology, chemistry and physics	59%	56%	65%	43%
Practical job skills for office or industry	57%	55%	57%	33%
Advanced mathematics such as calculus	37%	38%	22%	29%
The history and geography of such places as Europe or Asia	35%	35%	48%	29%
Classic works from such writers as Shakespeare and Plato	23%	21%	33%	21%

Source: Public Agenda

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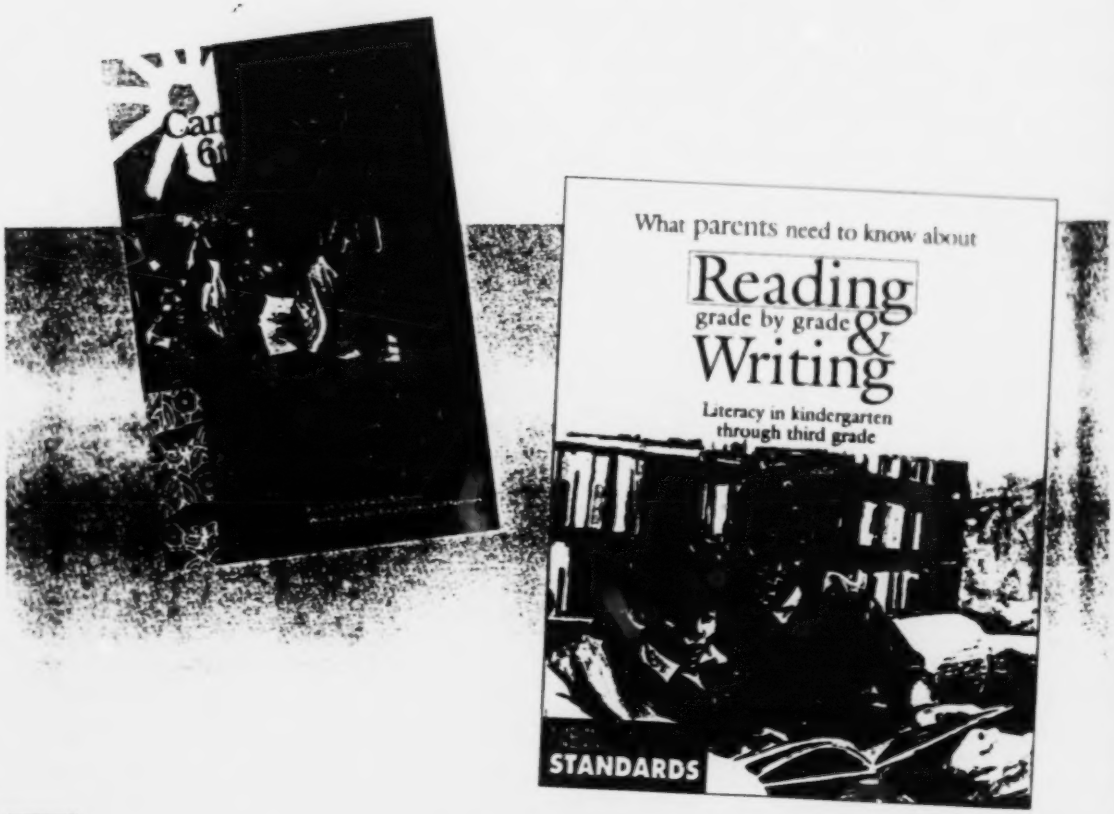
[5]

Develop Short, Straightforward Messages

Don't overload people with too much information. Less is more. One page is better than two. Provide an executive summary for everyone and more detail for the handful who want it.

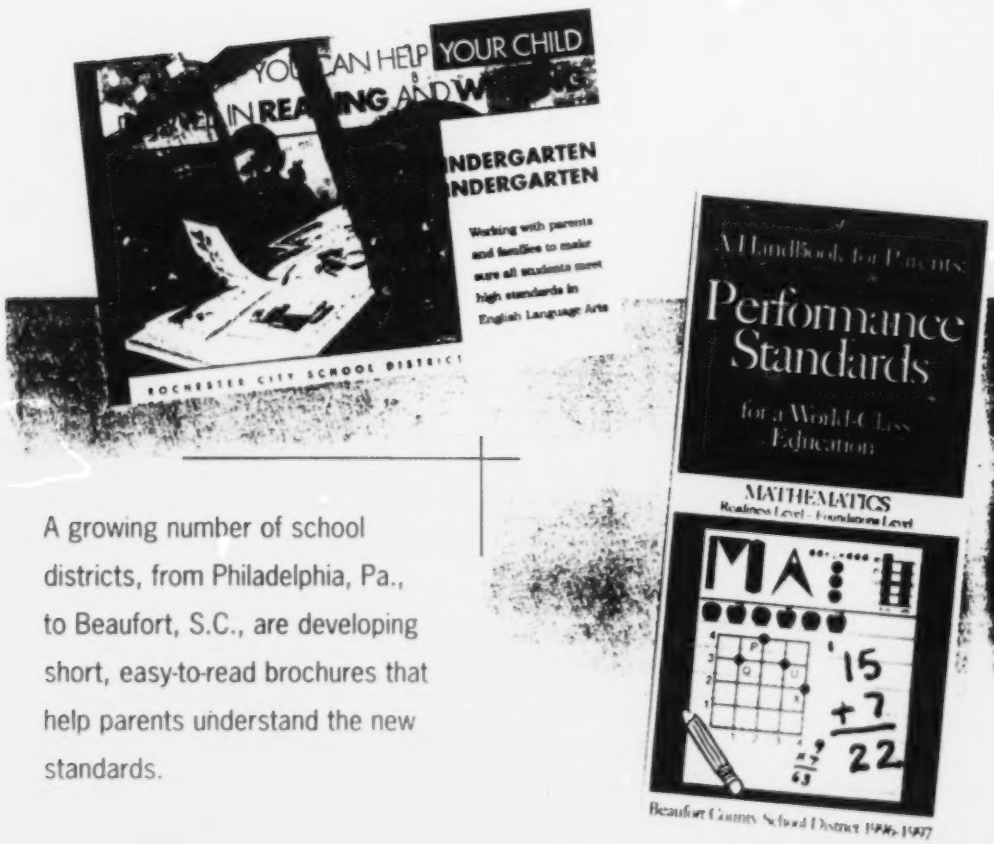
Avoid jargon and red-flag words. Speak the language of people who don't have nearly as much specialized knowledge as you. Don't get bogged down in "educationese."

Pare off the language barnacles — the acronyms, multiterm phrases, and the three- and four-syllable words that slow down communication. For example, rather than saying "exit standards" talk



about "what students need to know to get a diploma." Instead of "authentic assessments," talk about "tests that require students to actually show what they know — through a project or exhibit, for example." This will get you down to plain words that have the same meaning for everybody.

Try this: Before publishing your next communication about standards (newsletter, report card, letter to parents, etc.), ask your spouse, secretary and neighbor to read it first. If it makes sense to them, go to print. Otherwise, revise.



A growing number of school districts, from Philadelphia, Pa., to Beaufort, S.C., are developing short, easy-to-read brochures that help parents understand the new standards.

[6]

Show, Don't Tell

Parents especially value seeing what standards-based education looks like in the classroom. Even the best-written content standards alone don't communicate very much by themselves. Use reading lists, sample test items, examples of student work and student performances to show what standards look like in action. Seeing is believing.

Remember the adage: "Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I will remember. Involve me and I will understand."

Schools all across the country — often with business, civic and faith community partners — have used various strategies to illustrate what school improvement actually looks like in practice. These include brown-bag lunches for employees and parishioners, school fairs for parents and community members, student performances at the chamber of commerce or Rotary Club, "Take the Test" celebrations, mini town meetings to discuss standards and tests, report card nights, and parent-teacher forums.

See for yourself ...

States such as **Washington** and **Delaware** have used statewide "Take the Test" campaigns to give citizens and state leaders (including governors, legislators, prominent CEOs and news reporters) an opportunity to take abbreviated versions of the state tests. To extend their reach, these campaigns have been conducted with the help of companies such as McDonald's and Wal-Mart.

Many schools in **Vermont** and elsewhere host annual or quarterly "Report Card" nights — chances for parents and the community to see samples of outstanding student work, ranging from science projects to history essays.

In **Massachusetts**, for example, the business community has launched a long-term campaign to help students see for themselves how the skills they learn at school apply directly to real-world jobs, such as product development engineers, who use trigonometry, and process cooks, who analyze data every day.

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Make use of the short brochures distributed by the Education Excellence Partnership (EEP) and the Ad Council. (See "Strengthening Your Child's Academic Future," which features sample standards and test questions from around the country, and "Challenge Young Minds: 50 Ways to Better Education," which provides specific suggestions for parents and family members, employers, teachers, and school administrators about how they can help students in their community. Details are available at www.edex.org.)

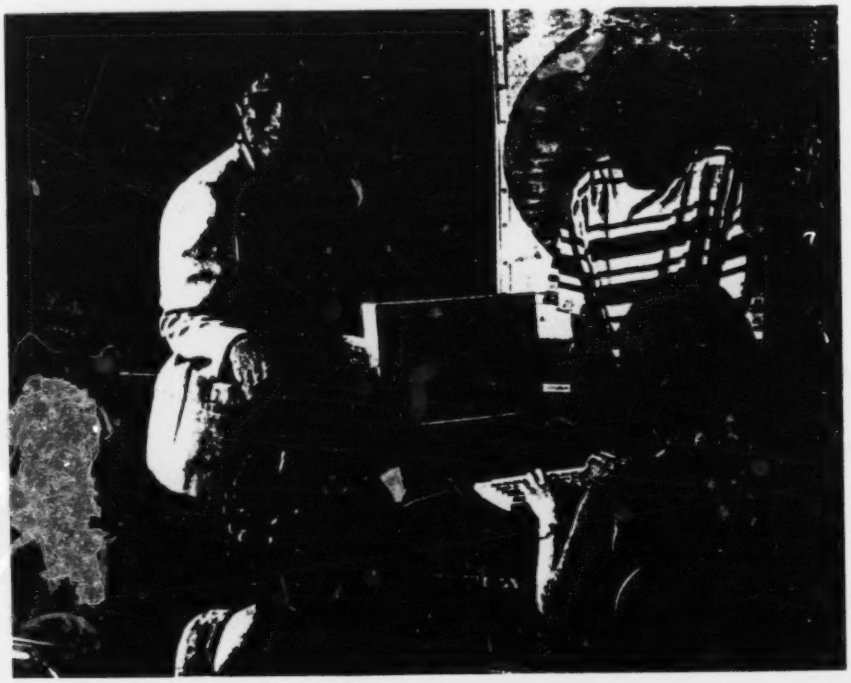
The EEP and Ad Council also have available several short videos on standards and testing that communities are using as "discussion starters" at meetings. Use the "Hurdles" video to prompt a discussion among your parents around the question: How high should we set the bar here at our school? Use the "Bridge Builder," "Airplane Mechanic" and "Heart Surgeon" videos to help people without children currently in school (including senior citizens, taxpayers, voters and businesspeople) better understand that they have a direct stake in their community's schools. Use the "Challenge Young Minds" videos to spark discussion among students, parents and teachers in your school about the quality of instruction — and what it would take to convince more students to work harder.

[7]

Use the Most Effective Messengers

Use teachers and school staff as your front-line communicators. Parents most often get their information about school issues from teachers and teacher aides — and also from school secretaries, bus drivers, custodians and food service workers. Yet these key communicators are often the last to know what their local schools are doing. Principals can change that by communicating more regularly inside their buildings.

For example, in Edmonds, Wash., north of Seattle, the school district systematically trains school employees to talk about standards and literacy. In fact, the community's hairdressers and barbers also serve as ambassadors for school improvement. School employees use them as "listening posts" to learn about what people are saying about the schools and to communicate useful information about standards so they can help dispel confusion or misinformation.



Developing a cadre of communicators ...

Communities such as **Edmonds, Wash.**, and **Beaverton, Ore.**, have programs that help every single employee — from principals to bus drivers — be a "key communicator," who understands and can explain the district's priorities and listens closely to community feedback.

In **Kentucky**, a parent institute provides intensive training to some 200 parents a year, helping them become more effective advocates at the school level — for their children and *all* children. Learning how to communicate better with principals and teachers is a central part of the training.

Don't rely on print or video materials alone. Face-to-face, first-person testimonials are the most effective. Develop opportunities for parents to talk with each other and with teachers about what students are expected to know and be able to do.

You probably will want to build in some time for communications training for your front-line staff (if you're lucky, the central office will take the lead here). Work with teachers so they can provide responsive answers to the five questions parents are most likely to ask about standards (drawn from the EEP/Ad Council brochure "Strengthening Your Child's Academic Future"):

- What skills and knowledge will my child be expected to master this year?
- How will my child be evaluated?
- What can I do to stay more involved in my child's academic progress?
- How do you accommodate differences in learning?
- How are students prepared for further learning after high school?

As part of your training, invite a group of trusted parents (parent-teacher organization leaders, for example) to critique the teachers' responses.

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[8]

Repeat, Repeat, Repeat

Just when you are getting tired of saying the same thing, many of your listeners finally are starting to hear your point. Say it again. And again. And again.

[9]

Where to Start

Some principals will be fortunate enough to have communications support from their district office or a third-party partner such as an education fund or local business. Others will be on their own. Regardless of the specific circumstances, every principal should be able to find the time and resources to do the following:

Talk about improving student achievement in all of your communications in staff meetings, with your parent-teacher organization, at community forums and at student assemblies. Some schools are even building in standards pep talks during halftime at high school football games. Moreover, even when you're talking about other subjects — like safety, discipline and teacher preparation — you need to remind people that the reason you're dealing with those issues is to improve student performance.

Listen to parents. Find out what they know about your standards and tests, what they like and dislike about them, and how they want to be kept informed about them. Tailor your future communications accordingly.

Involve teachers. Bring teachers into the planning process for your school's communications strategy from the start. Help them

develop their skills as effective communicators with parents about standards and tests in your school, your district, your state, the United States and even other nations.

Have at least one meeting with leaders from each of your primary audiences — for example, teachers, parents, business, religious organizations, and community groups like the YMCA and Boys' and Girls' Clubs. It's essential to engage your communities around student learning. Use these meetings to explain how you're using new standards and tests to raise student achievement, build allies, identify potential problems and find out how best to approach other members of each group. Each of these groups also communicates directly with parents; see how they can help you spread the word.

Develop a short, easy-to-read annual report card. Use it to report on test scores and other indicators of progress such as lower dropout rates, higher attendance rates and the like.

[10]

For More Information

This short brochure does not pretend to offer anything close to comprehensive advice for principals on how to communicate about standards. Consider it an introduction.

However, the EEP Web site (www.edex.org) has much more detailed advice, plus links to or downloadable PDF files of many of the sample materials mentioned in these pages.

In addition, the Web site offers a wealth of additional background information on the nationwide effort to set higher standards, develop stronger tests to measure student performance against those standards and create accountability systems that provide incentives for better performance.

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